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Reflective Journal Writing as an Effective Technique in the Writing Process*

كتابة اليوميات التأملية كوسيلة فعالة في تطوير مهارة الكتابة

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Abstract

This study assessed the benefits of keeping reflective journal writing on improving English writing skills, increasing motivation, enhancing creativity, and critical thinking among university students. It also explored differences in students' performance and attitudes due to gender, and some writing practices. The sample consisted of 120 male and female students from four sections of an undergraduate writing course. A 19-item questionnaire was distributed and the items were structured according to three dimensions: improving learning, motivation and self confidence, and value and convenience. The results of the study indicated the positive effects of the use of reflective journal writing in enhancing motivation and self-confidence and improving learning in general and the writing skills in particular. The results also indicated that female students favored reflective journal writing more than male students. Furthermore, students who voluntarily wrote their own

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* *"It is generally believed that the thinking process involves two aspects: reflective thinking and critical thinking. They are not separate processes; rather, they are closely connected" (Brookfield 1987).*

paragraphs were more motivated to write than others and had a much better perception. In sum, reflective journal writing makes the writing course enjoyable, motivating, relevant and exciting.

Keywords: reflective writing, motivation, experiential learning, critical thinking

ملخص

قيمت هذه الدراسة فوائد استعمال كتابة اليوميات التأملية في تحسين مهارات الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية وزيادة الدافعية وتعزيز الإبداع والتفكير النقدي لدى طلبة الجامعة، وقد تقصّت هذه الدراسة الفروق في أداء وتوجهات الطلبة التي تعزى إلى الجنس وبعض الممارسات في الكتابة. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من (١٢٠) طالباً وطالبة من أربع شعب لمساق "الكتابة" لطلبة البكالوريوس. ووزعت استبانة مكونة من (١٩) بندا" بحيث تمحورت هذه البنود حول ثلاثة أبعاد: تحسين التعلم، والدافعية والثقة بالنفس، والقيمة والموائمة. وخلصت الدراسة الى بيان الآثار الايجابية لاستعمال كتابة اليوميات التأملية في تعزيز الدافعية والثقة بالنفس وتحسين التعلم بشكل عام ومهارات الكتابة على وجه الخصوص، وبيّنت النتائج أيضاً أن الطالبات فضلن استعمال كتابة اليوميات التأملية أكثر من الطلاب وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، فقد كان الطلبة الذين كتبوا فقراتهم بشكل طوعي، أكثر دافعية للكتابة من الطلبة الآخرين وكان لهم تقبل أفضل بكثير لفكرة كتابة اليوميات التأملية. وبإيجاز فإن كتابة اليوميات التأملية تجعل مساق الكتابة أكثر امتاعاً ودافعية وإثارة للاهتمام.

1. Introduction

Reflective journal writing is an effective learning technique that enables students to learn while they are writing. Students can use journals for a number of purposes such as writing about interesting topics, expanding their imagination, and establishing connections between new information and the things they already know. Kerka (1996) points out that journal writing is considered to be a critical aspect of knowledge processing and that it helps the learners to “articulate connections between new information and what they already know” (p.2). This technique helps students to enhance their learning as they have the opportunity to think and reflect on what they have learnt.

Moreover, reflective journal writing has the potential to promote critical thinking. Priest and Sturgess (2005) suggest that journal reflection provides an invaluable experience as it helps ‘the individuals to

subject their personal beliefs to critical analysis in a safe environment' (p.2). In addition, journal writing encourages students to keep an invaluable record for their thoughts, feelings, experiences, personal values and beliefs. As explained by Dyment and O'Connell (2003), journal writing is the "recording of daily events, personal reflections, questions about the environment, and reactions to experiences."

Furthermore, reflective journal writing offers students opportunities to communicate with their instructors with confidence and motivation as there is no anxiety related to assessment or grading (Park, 2003). On the contrary, students can have a role to evaluate themselves and monitor their progress. Garfield (1994) pointed out that engaging the learner in self-assessment is a critical and early part of the assessment process and learners "need to learn how to take a critical look at their own knowledge, skills, and applications of their knowledge and skills." Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002) opined that a reflective journal involves learners in 'self-assessment, collaborative critique, self-reflection and goal setting' (p.1). According to Graham (2003), reflective journal writing helps students to develop confidence, competence in their writing and perceive themselves as writers.

2. What is Reflective Journal Writing?

According to a study prepared by The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales in 2008, reflective writing is:

- your response to experiences, opinions, events or new information
- your response to thoughts and feelings
- a way of thinking to explore your learning
- an opportunity to gain self-knowledge
- a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning
- a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills
- a way of making meaning out of what you study

The Learning Centre

Another report prepared by ProDAIT (2006) (Professional Development for Academics Involved in Teaching) revealed what is meant by reflective journal writing and its benefits. According to this report, reflective journal writing has a number of values. First, reflective journal writing provides an informal place where learners can write their own reactions to their experiences. Second, it can enhance the 'conversation with oneself'. Third, journal writing can be a tool that helps learners make better sense of their experiences by summarising them and actively trying to understand them. Finally, it enables learners to go back and 'see' their own thinking. To explain, learners will have "a lasting record of thoughts that provides evidence of our own development" (p.1).

3. Theoretical Framework

Using reflective journals as a learning tool is deeply rooted in several learning theories (interactionists theories, reflective thinking theory (Dewey, 1933), learner autonomy, experiential learning, personal growth and professional development). Dewey (1938) advocated learning experiences that promote meaningful learning. According to him, effective learning can take place when learners are actively engaged with the content in an extremely personal way. He opined that experiential learning is an ingenious means to achieve this purpose as learners are highly motivated. Dewey (1938) believed that there was a need for "a theory of experience in order that education may be intelligently conducted upon the basis of experience" (p. 23). Dewey (1933) suggested a pattern of thought that aims to "transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious" (p. 101-102).

Similarly, Kolb (1984) believes that experiential learning is a vital aspect in engaging the learners. According to him, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Kolb outlined a four-stage model that leads to effective learning: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c)

abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. It is a cyclical model of learning where learners may begin at any stage and then follow the sequence (Figure 1).

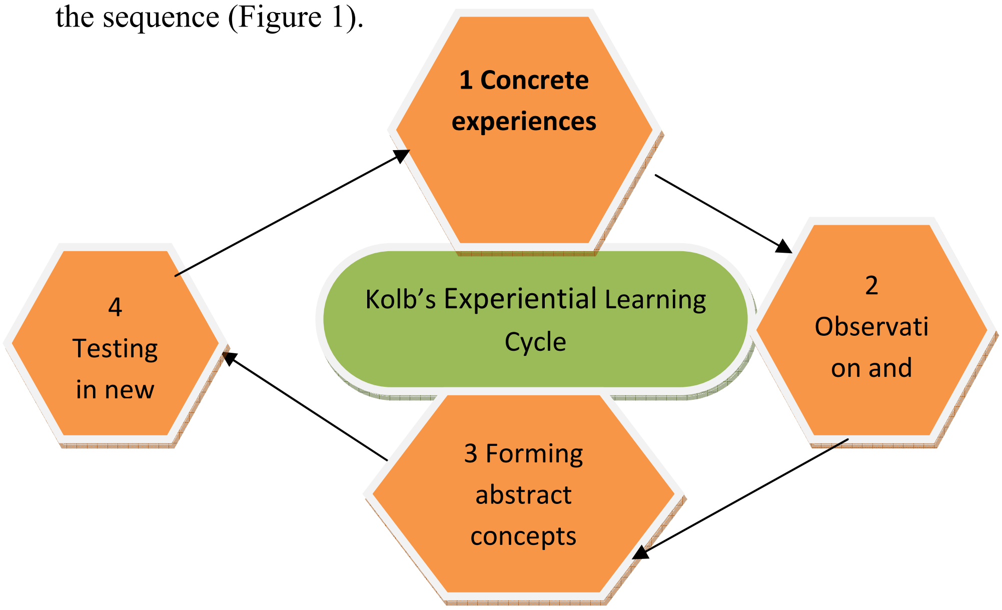


Figure (1): Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

Reflective journal writing can promote learning through Kolb's four stages, where the learners actively experience certain activities such as a journal where they talk about a specific experience in stage one and reflect back on that experience in stage two. In the third stage, learners think and try to explore explanations regarding the meaning of the experience. Finally, in stage four, learners try to use their experiences, make connections with the new information to make decisions and solve problems resulting in better interpretations, or understandings of their experiences. Similarly, Scanlon and Chernomas (1997) described the processes of writing a journal in a three-stage reflective learning model:

– Stage 1 of reflection is **awareness**. This could be stimulated by thoughts about an event in teaching that went well, or seemed problematic.

- Stage 2 involves the individual in **critical analysis** of the event, exploring what happened and why. We consider how this experience relates to previous ideas and practice.
- At stage 3, a **new perspective** emerges, or previous ideas are confirmed or reinforced, based on the reflection. From this, developments occur, in thinking or feelings, and sometimes there will be changes in practice.

Consequently, reflective journal writing, as a learning tool, offers learners with various opportunities to discover new ideas and reveal inner secrets. According to Baldwin (1991), "Writing bridges the inner and outer world and connects the paths of action and reflection" (p. 9). Rogers (1982) stated that "the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered self-appropriated learning" (p. 223). Vygotsky (1986) opined that reflective journal writing enables learners to make connections between themselves and the world around them. He indicates that:

Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by emotion, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last "why" in the analysis of thinking, (p. 252)

According to Vygotsky (1978)

"We have also come to know a great deal more about the significance of collaborative learning, for many now believe that how we come principally to know ourselves is through the interaction with each other. Beginning with ….. the view that thinking is a social activity, initially shared among people but gradually internalized to reappear again as an individual achievement. The conception of mind inherent in the constructivist view not only is active in nature, but also seeks out dialogue and discourse with other minds. These social settings provide an audience for an individual's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, where audiences request clarification, justification, and elaboration. Learning with understanding is more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others, as well as to oneself;

striving for an explanation often makes a learner integrate and structure knowledge in new ways" (p.158).

Reflective journal writing can offer means to enlighten learners' thinking habits, and to engage with their instructors in meaningful dialogue where both can examine their thinking patterns and reflect on them. According to Chapman (1990), "students' writing in response to reading is one of the most valid indices of whether the student has been able to derive meaning from the text" (p.1). He adds that the process "should reflect various types of writing as well as levels of complexity related to the task assigned in the prompt" (p.1).

4. Literature Review

The use of reflective journal learning as a tool to enhance the learning process has been the subject of several studies. A number of studies suggested that journal writing is a supportive tool that encourages reflective activity in learners and that reflective thinking skills can be taught and learned (Francis, 1995).

Several studies investigated the effects of reflective journal writing on students' learning. O'Connell and Dyment (2006) investigated the benefits of the journal as a tool to encourage students in the process of reflecting on their own learning and improving their own writing skills. Similarly, Kerka, (1996) indicated that students' responses can be used in order to "articulate connections between new information and what they already know" (p.2). Chirema, (2007) examined the use of reflective journals in promoting reflection and learning in post-registration nursing students. The study revealed that student writing "can be used as evidence for the presence or absence of reflective thinking". According to the study, this evidence also indicates that reflective journal writing is a useful tool that may promote reflection and learning as students become better aware of their learning achievements.

Lew and Schmidt (2007) conducted a study at a post-secondary institution to investigate the extent to which students believe that journal writing improves their learning. They found that "students' beliefs about the usefulness of journal writing in enabling students to think and write

reflectively are related to their beliefs about improving learning through frequent journal writing, and the use of the journal writing as an impression management tool, and as a means to feedback on team work" (p.579). They concluded that using online reflection journals offers numerous opportunities for students to reflect on their learning, and for facilitators to monitor students' progress through their reflections.

Williams (2008) investigated the use of reflective journal writing in an 8th grade classroom. She found that reflective journal writing created greater class participation, stronger academic achievement, and a better opportunity for students to connect with the subject matter.

Spaulding and Wilson (2002) examined the journals of 34 students. They posited that reflective journal writing can serve four purposes for the student. According to them, journal writing is important for students as it serves as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences, establishes and maintains a relationship with the instructor, provides a safe outlet for frustrations and concerns; and aids internal dialogue. Consequently, reflective journal writing can aid in promoting critical thinking skills when learners use the writing process to analyze challenging classroom issues and to establish alternative solutions to those problems (Dyment, and O'Connell, 2003).

Greiman and Convington (2007) examined the journal writing experiences of student teachers to obtain insight into the process of developing reflective practitioners. They found that student teachers were somewhat comfortable with writing as a form of communication and many perceived that journal writing went well. The participants in their study identified reflective thinking as the most frequent benefit of journal writing.

Sen (2010) examined students' reflective writing in terms of identifiable outcomes and explored students' thoughts on reflection and reflective writing as a process. The study revealed a positive relationship with a number of outcomes, academic learning, the need for self development, actual self development, critical review, awareness of ones' own mental functions, decision making and empowerment and

emancipation. According to Sen (2010), the most important advantage was evident when learners “were most analytical in their reflection and expressed that in deeply analytical reflective writing” (p. 91). Dyment and O’Connell (2010) sought to explore the conflicting results between the research that shows that student journals contain primarily deeply reflective entries and the other research that presents a less optimistic perspective, finding that a majority of student journals contain mostly descriptive accounts of events, with little to no critical reflection present. In their study, they identified a series of factors that may limit or enable high quality reflection in student journals. Such factors are clarity of expectations, training, responses, assessments, relationships with the lecturer, and developing the practice. They drew upon their reading of the literature, their multi-phase research project on journal writing, and reflections on their own teaching practice.

Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) suggest that the interaction between journal writers and their audience ‘provides opportunities for student teachers to make practical theory explicit’ (p.39). The analysis and critical observation can help student teachers to ‘critique and modify their practice’ (Gil-Garcia and Cintron, 2002, p.4). Hine (2000) believes that mentoring develops ‘more self-reflective, meta-cognitively aware and self-directed learners’ (p.1).

Based on the reviewed literature, it is noticed that reflective journal writing is vital for maximizing interaction among students, increasing motivation, and developing critical thinking skills. Moreover, some researchers reported better achievement for students in the subject matter.

5. Statement of the Problem

University students encounter writing problems due to the lack of some writing practices, writing skills and ideas that would help them to be competent writers. This is obvious when students are asked to write essays for various university courses. This may lead them to score low grades in some courses or even fail in others. Consequently, there is a need to examine if reflective journal writing can advance students’ writing fluency and increase their motivation.

6. Significance of the Study

The use of reflective journal writing enables students to write unconstrained on an interesting topic related to texts that they have covered in a certain course or any other personal experiences they have undergone. Unimpeded by fear about grades, students are more motivated and confident in their writing skill and are able to acquire good writing skills. This practice is helpful for students improving the students' competence in writing. Reflective journal writing is chosen in this research to show that it has the potential of maximizing the students' involvement and motivation. Moreover, students can express their thoughts and feelings through such journals without worrying about spelling and grammar**.**

7. Objectives of the Study

This paper aims at examining the benefits of keeping reflective writing journals in improving English writing skills, increasing motivation to write, enhancing creativity and critical thinking skills among Hebron University students. It also aims to explore if there are differences in students performance and attitudes due to gender, level of proficiency, writing practices.

8. Research Questions

The research questions of the study were:

a. What are the benefits of reflective journal writing as perceived by Hebron University students?
b. Does reflective journal writing enhance motivation to write and confidence, among Hebron University students?
c. Does reflective journal writing improve language learning among Hebron University students?
d. How do the students perceive the value and convenience of the reflective journal writing process?
e. Are there differences in the students' attitudes due to their gender and writing practices?

9. Methodology

The present section discusses the population, research instrument, procedure, developing the questionnaire and its reliability.

9.a. Population

The sample for the study consisted of 120 male and female students from four writing classes. Participants were students from sections of an undergraduate writing course taught by the same instructor throughout the academic year 2010/2011.

9.b. Research Instruments

Development and Distribution of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review conducted by the researcher. The researcher developed an appropriate questionnaire that is suitable for examining attitudes towards reflective journal writing practices. The items were structured according to three dimensions that were addressed in the study. The three dimensions are *improving learning*, *motivation and self-confidence*, and *value and convenience*. The questionnaire consisted of 19 statements using Likert's 5-point scale, (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) (See Appendix).

A 19-item questionnaire was distributed during the Fall and Spring semesters of the academic year 2010/2011. The questionnaire was distributed to the students at the end of both the Fall semester and the Spring semester. This questionnaire was used to elicit their views about the benefits of reflective journal writing enhancing and improving language learning, motivation and self-confidence, as well as examining its value and convenience. Quantitative data was analyzed statistically by using the SPSS program.

9.c. Procedure

The students were encouraged to write daily or weekly reflective journals based on certain articles they read or experiences that have

undergone. It was a voluntary exercise but by the end of each semester the majority of the students wrote at least 10 journals and some wrote more than 30 journals.

10. A. Reliability of the Questionnaire

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was tabulated. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire is high (r = 0.80) indicating a high degree of internal consistency, and therefore presenting a considerably reliable instrument.

10.B Validity of the Questionnaire

Two experts from Hebron University examined the content validity of the questionnaire. One of them is from the Faculty of Education and he is expert in designing questionnaires and statistical analysis and the second is an associate professor in Applied Linguistics. Both were asked to validate the content of the questionnaire and to assess its clarity and suitability to examine the degree to which the scale of items reflected reflective journal writing dimensions. The two experts commented on the questionnaire format, structuring of some item and if each item in the questionnaire was applicable for a Likert-scale student response. Based on their suggestions, the necessary changes were made and incorporated in the final questionnaire.

11. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of Part One in the Questionnaire, demographic information and some students' writing practices:

11.a Gender

The majority of the respondents were females which reflects the overall population of Hebron University, Palestine. The overwhelming majority of students 102 (85%) were females, 18 (15%) were males.

11.b Writing Practices:

As the study concerns a writing course, it is also interesting to see the students' writing practices. Questions on students' writing practices were

asked (e,g. *When do you start writing a paragraph? Throughout this course, I wrote, … I practise writing English paragraphs, my high school teachers encouraged us to write journals. I read English newspapers and magazines. I only write English paragraphs when my instructor gives me an assignment to do***).** The results are shown in Table 1.

Table (1): Writing Practices (n=120).

Writing Practices	Options	Number	Percentage%
When do you start writing a paragraph?	Several days before it is due	55	45.8
	About a day before it is due	51	42.5
	At the last possible minute	14	11.7
	Total	120	100
Throughout this course, I wrote	3-5 journals weekly	22	18.3
	1-2 journals weekly	74	61.7
	1-2 journals monthly	22	18.3
	Missing	2	1.7
	Total	120	100
I practise writing English paragraphs)	Every day	13	10.8
	Twice a week	53	44.2
	Once a week	39	32.5
	Twice a month	11	9.2
	Once a month	3	2.5
	Missing	1	.8
	Total	120	100
I only write English paragraphs when my instructor gives me an assignment to do	Yes	51	42.5
	No	69	57.5
	Total	120	100

…continue table (1)

Writing Practices	Options	Number	Percentage%
My high school teachers encouraged us to write journals	Yes	33	27.5
	No	87	72.5
	Total	120	100
I write English e-mail to my friends and family	Yes	69	57.5
	No	51	42.5
	Total	120	100
I read English newspapers and magazines	One hour daily	31	25.8
	More than two hours daily	3	2.5
	More than four hours weekly	39	32.5
	I do not read	46	38.3
	Missing	1	.8
Total		**120**	**100**

The following section presents results of Part Two in the questionnaire. It aims to answer the research questions of the current study.

a. What are the benefits of reflective journal writing as perceived by Hebron University students?

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for the whole questionnaire items to examine the benefits of reflective journal writing as perceived by Hebron University students. The reliability coefficient for the 19 items was tabulated. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the questionnaire items is (r = 0.80) indicating a high degree of internal consistency. See Table 2 for the calculated means of items and their standard deviation.

Table (2): means and standard deviation for the whole items in the questionnaire.

No	Statement	M	SD
1	Reflective Journal writing helped me to talk about my experiences	4.32	.840
2	Reflective Journal writing helped me to express my ideas and opinions	4.33	.714
3	Reflective Journal writing helped me to respond to my thoughts and feelings	4.21	.829
4	Reflective Journal writing stimulated my critical thinking skills	4.09	1.021
5	Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning	4.13	.784
6	Reflective Journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge	4.24	1.037
7	Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning	4.06	.843
8	Reflective Journal writing allowed me to describe what I understood	4.15	1.034
9	Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills	4.39	.873
10	Reflective Journal writing enhanced my communication skills	3.78	1.119
11	Frequent journal writing increased my creativity	4.13	1.058
12	Journal writing motivated me to write more	4.18	.961
13	I did not understand what I am supposed to write in my journal *(Recoded)*	3.95	1.302
14	I did not have enough time to write in my journals *(Recoded)*	3.48	1.489
15	Reflective Journal writing is a waste of time *(Recoded)*	4.55	.969
16	I find it easy to write in my journal	3.18	1.090

…continue table (2)

No	Statement	M	SD
17	Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued	4.27	.959
18	I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal	3.34	1.247
19	Overall, this was a worthwhile experience	4.35	1.120

As the table reveals, most of the items got high ratings with item number 15 getting the highest rating (m=4.55). This means that student did not perceive the reflective journal writing as a waste of time. It should be noticed that the data for this item has been recoded as it is negatively structured. Responses to negatively stated items (n = 3) were reversed so that for all items the highest response score was indicative of a positive rating of each statement.

Item 19 lent support for this perception as most of the students perceived the reflective journal writing as a worthwhile experience (m=4.35) by receiving a very high degree of agreement among the participants. The item that got second place and got a very high rating (mean=4.39) is item number 9 (the Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills). This item is followed by items number 1, number 2, and number 6. These three items address the issue of talking about personal experiences, expressing their ideas and thoughts, and gaining self-knowledge.

The items that got less agreement are items 14, 16, and 18. The least rating for item number 16 (mean=3.18) means that some students did not “find it easy to write in their journal.” This is explained in item number 14 which addressed the issue of having sufficient time to write journals. This item got a medium rating (mean=3.48) which means that the process of journal writing is a demanding process and it requires time for students to reflect and express their thoughts. Similarly, the students gave a medium rating to item number 18 (mean=3.34) (I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal). This means that though most of them viewed the process of journal writings as a worthwhile

experience, not all of them are ready to share their personal experiences with their classmates.

b. Does reflective journal writing enhance motivation to write and confidence, among Hebron University students?

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to increasing motivation and developing confidence. They are 6 items. The reliability coefficient for the 6 items was tabulated. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the 6 items is (r = 0.71) indicating a good degree of internal consistency. See Table 3 for the calculated means of items and their standard deviation.

Table (3): means and standard deviation for the motivation and self-confidence dimension.

No	Statement	M	SD
1	Reflective Journal writing helped me to talk about my experiences	4.32	.840
2	Reflective Journal writing helped me to express my ideas and opinions	4.33	.714
3	Reflective Journal writing helped me to respond to my thoughts and feelings	4.21	.829
10	Reflective Journal writing enhanced my communication skills	3.78	1.119
11	Frequent journal writing increased my creativity	4.13	1.058
12	Journal writing motivated me to write more	4.18	.961

As Table 3 reveals, generally, most of the items got a very high rating. This indicates that reflective journal writing helps in enhancing learners' motivation and builds up their confidence. This is in agreement with Graham' study (2003), where she found that reflective journal writing develops confidence and competence among learners, and Thrope (2004) who found that such as reflective learning journals to be meaningful learning experiences for learners. Moreover, Park (2003) found in his study that some students reported a growth in their self-confidence.

c. Does reflective journal writing improve language learning among Hebron University students?

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the questionnaire items that are related to increasing motivation and developing confidence. They are 6 items. The reliability coefficient for the 6 items was tabulated. The results showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the 6 items is (r = 0.73) indicating a good degree of internal consistency. See Table 4 for the calculated means of items and their standard deviation.

Table (4): means and standard deviation for improving learning dimension

No	Statement	M	SD
4	Reflective Journal writing stimulated my critical thinking skills	4.09	1.021
5	Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning	4.13	.784
6	Reflective Journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge	4.24	1.037
7	Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning	4.06	.843
8	Reflective Journal writing allowed me to describe what I understood	4.15	1.034
9	Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills	4.39	.873

As Table 4 reveals, generally, all of the items got a very high rating. This indicates that reflective journal writing stimulates critical thinking skills and helps learners to explore their own learning by giving them an opportunity to gain self-knowledge. It also helps learners to understand what they learnt and to reflect on what they understood. All of this will definitely offer the learners' an opportunity to develop and reinforce their writing skills, one of the objectives of the writing course. This is in agreement with the findings of Lew and Schmidt (2007) who reported that their students believe that journal writing contributes to improving

their learning. They reported that their students indicated that reflective journal writing has a valuable effect on their learning "as enabling them to think and write reflectively". Similarly, Williams (2008) found that "ninety-four percent of the students said the journals helped them understand and describe their learning," and "ninety-four percent of the students stated the journals made their subject matter easier." Moreover, Dyment and O'Connell (2010) concluded that "reflective journals require students to engage in critical reflection and higher order thinking; they force students to be more open-ended and less prescriptive and, they permit students to be creative and questioning."

d. How do the students perceive the value and convenience of the reflective journal writing process?

They are 7 items in this category. The reliability coefficient for the 7 items was tabulated. The result showed that the overall Cronbach Alpha Coefficient of the 7 items is (r = 0.68) indicating an acceptable degree of internal consistency. See Table 5 for the calculated means of items and their standard deviation.

Table (5): means and standard deviation for the value and convenience dimension

No	Statement	M	SD
13	I did not understand what I am supposed to write in my journal (Recoded)	3.95	1.302
14	I did not have enough time to write in my journals (Recoded)	3.48	1.489
15	Reflective Journal writing is a waste of time (Recoded)	4.55	.969
16	I find it easy to write in my journal	3.18	1.090
17	Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged / continued	4.27	.959
18	I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal	3.34	1.247
19	Overall, this was a worthwhile experience	4.35	1.120

As Table 5 reveals, the items that addressed the ease and convenience of the reflective journal writing process got a medium rating indicating that the process is a demanding one and requires sufficient time. This means that the process is difficult and challenging. This is in agreement with Park (2003) who found in his study that a recurrent theme in many journal entries was difficulty of the task. Similar findings were reported in Thrope (3004) who found reflective learning journals to be demanding and time-consuming. Sen (2010) concluded her study by saying that "Reflective practice is not a clear concept to understand at first; it is also challenging to teach and can be demanding in the amount of student support that is needed, but with that commitment, the students can benefit from the skills they develop."

Regarding the items that addressed the value of the reflective writing process, they got a very high rating as revealed in items 15, 17, and 19. This indicates that the students enjoyed the experience of reflective journal writing and thus they did not consider it to be a waste of time. On the contrary, they viewed it as a *worthwhile learning experience* and consequently it should be *encouraged/continued.* This is in agreement with Park (2003) who found that "most students recorded that they felt that this was a useful thing to do and valuable to them in a number of important ways. One of his students described the experience as "a most beneficial exercise" and another student describing it as, "a worthwhile exercise" and a third student describing it as "rewarding, and at times quite enjoyable to do… an effective tool for learning." He added that his students demonstrated more enthusiasm by reporting that they feel it is a most beneficial exercise, "one I feel which will continue to work in the future, especially with regard to triggering further reading and thinking about it." Similarly, Williams (2008) found that seventy-five percent of the participants in her study stated they would like to continue using the reflective journals." A final point that is noticed in this table is item number 18. As the table reveals, not all of the student would like to share with the class what they wrote in their journal. This point has been raised by Dyment and O'Connell (2010) when they explained that their participants "have repeatedly expressed their reluctance to reflect

honestly and deeply if they are concerned about the trustworthiness of the reader." To support their findings, they cited Epp (2008) who revealed that "students might choose to keep writing superficially if they have reason to believe that the reader does not create a safe space for their deep thoughts, ideas, and reflections." Dyment and O'Connell (2010) clarify that students share information about their relationships, families, histories, hopes, fears, our concerns, joys, sadness, and dreams. Due to this, they suggested "that this sharing allows a trusting relationship to develop, and this trusting relationship often manifests itself in the students' journals." According to them, what is needed is a fairly mature and responsible group of students who can handle the issue of journal sharing.

e. Are there differences in the students' performance and attitudes due to their gender and writing practices?

In order to examine whether there is a significant difference between the male and female students and reflective journal writing, a t-test was carried out and Table 6 shows that there is a significant difference at 0.001.

Table (6): t-test for Equality of Means.

	Gender	N	M	SD	T	Df	Sig.
Attitude	Female	102	4.115	.454	3.152	118	0.001
	Male	18	3.742	.478			

This means that female students have better perception for the reflective journal writing process. This is in line with the literature that shows the superiority of females in the language arts.

Similarly, the researcher investigated whether there is a significant difference between some students' writing practices and their perception of the reflective journal writing process. A t-test was carried out. Table 7 shows that some dimensions have a significant difference and others have no significant difference.

Table (7): t-test for Equality of Means for some writing practices.

	Group	N	M	SD	T	df	Sig.
I write English emails to my family and friends	Yes	69	4.09	.46537	0688	118	.493
	No	51	4.02	.49801			
My high school English teachers encouraged me to write journals	Yes	33	3.98	.46998	-1.100	118	.274
	No	87	4.08	.48094			
I only write English paragraphs when my instructor gives me an assignment to do	Yes	51	3.88	.46256	-3.601	118	.001
	No	69	4.19	.45117			

As Table 7 reveals there were no significant differences between the students who said they write English emails and the students who are encouraged to write emails by their high school teachers. However a significant difference appeared between the students who only write English paragraphs when they are instructed to do so by their instructors. As Table 9 reveals the students who do not wait until they are asked by their instructors to write paragraphs viewed the process of reflective journal writing in a much better way than those who only start writing when they are instructed by their teachers. Cisero (2006) reported that "students who had more favorable attitudes toward the journal assignment tended to have higher journal grades. These findings suggest that students who were motivated to put effort into the assignment not

only had higher journal grades, but also saw the benefits of journal writing (in terms of their favorable attitude)."

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study showed that the participants in this study had positive attitudes towards reflective journal writing. The results of this study indicated the positive effects of the use of reflective journal writing in enhancing motivation and self confidence, improving learning in general and the writing skills in particular.

Moreover, the study indicated that female students favored the reflective journal writing process more than the male students. In addition to that, the results of this study indicated that the students who used to write paragraphs voluntarily had better attitudes than students who just wrote when instructed by their teachers. Thus, we can see that using reflective journal writing is beneficial to students as demonstrated by the results of this study. Additionally, the students who voluntarily wrote their own paragraphs were more motivated to write than the others and had a much better perception. To sum up, reflective journal writing can be used to develop the writing skills as evidenced by the statistically significant differences among the participants. Using reflective journal writing in EFL teaching has the added advantages of increasing motivation and self-confidence, and improving learning. Moreover, reflective journal writing makes the writing course enjoyable, motivating, relevant, and exciting. Thus, students should be aware of the benefits to be gained from reflecting and writing down those reflections in order to encourage them to continue the reflective writing practice.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Due to its benefits, reflective journal writing should be an integral component of university writing courses.
2. Similar studies should be carried out at other Palestinian universities in order to see whether their results corroborate or oppose the results of the present study.

3. English writing instructors at the university level should encourage their students to use reflective journal writing due to its many benefits.
4. Future studies in this domain should deal with other significant variables such as the socio-economic level, place of residence (rural, urban) and the role of the native and foreign cultures.
5. Future studies should investigate more thoroughly why female students have better perception of attitudes toward and performance in reflective journal writing.

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Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to measure the students' attitudes towards Journal writing. Please read the statements carefully and answer PART I and PART II

Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

PART (I): Please, tick (✓) the appropriate box.

A- Gender: □ Female □ Male
B- Year of study: □ Second □ Third
C- Current GPA: □ Below 60 □ 60 – 69 □ 70 – 79 □ 80-89 □ 90 and above
D- Major □ English (Education) □ English (Literature) □ English/ minor French
E- When do you start writing a paragraph? 1- Several days before it is due 2- About a day before it is due 3- At the last possible minute
F- Throughout this course, I wrote A - 3-5 journals weekly B - 1-2 journals weekly C- 1-2 journals monthly
G- I practise writing English paragraphs a- Every day b- Twice a week c- Once a week d- Twice a month e- Once a month
H. I write English email to my friends and family a- Yes b- No
I – My high school teachers encouraged us to write journals a- Yes b- No
J - I read English newspapers and magazines a- One hour daily b- More than two hours daily c- More than four hours weekly d- I do not read
K- I only write English paragraphs when my instructor gives me an assignment to do a- Yes b- No

PART (II): Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your views about Journal writing by putting a tick (✓) in the appropriate box using the scale given below

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

No		1	2	3	4	5
1	Reflective Journal writing helped me to talk about my experiences					
2	Reflective Journal writing helped me to express my ideas and opinions					
3	Reflective Journal writing helped me to respond to my thoughts and feelings					
4	Reflective Journal writing stimulated my critical thinking skills					
5	Reflective Journal writing was a way of thinking to explore my learning					
6	Reflective Journal writing was an opportunity to gain self-knowledge					
7	Reflective Journal writing helped me understand what I am learning					
8	Reflective Journal writing allowed me to describe what I understood					
9	Reflective Journal writing offered me a chance to develop and reinforce my writing skills					
10	Reflective Journal writing enhanced my communication skills					
11	Frequent journal writing increased my creativity					
12	Journal writing motivated me to write more					
13	I did not understand what I am supposed to write in my journal					
14	I did not have enough time to write in my journals					
16	Reflective Journal writing is a waste of time					
17	I find it easy to write in my journal					
18	Reflective Journal writing should be encouraged/continued					
19	I would like to share with the class what I wrote in my journal					
20	Overall, this was a worthwhile experience					